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THE HAUNTING MELODY

By HANS SCHNEIDER

THE other night, when letting up on some literary work for awhile, my eyes fell upon the picture of my dear mother in front of me. For quite awhile I contemplated her kind features and then, much refreshed, went back to my work. Two hours later, when I went to bed, an old lullaby she used to sing to us children was softly crooning in my mind and sang me to sleep again, spanning in an instant 50 years of time and 3,000 miles of distance, and awakening a flood of memories of youth and home.

Dr. Pierre Janet makes the remark in one of his interesting works, that "the mind is nobody's fool," and I would like to add to this that the mind fools its owner more than anything or everything else. It is a common, every-day experience that when our mind is not particularly occupied, all at once some melody or "tune" starts "running through our head," as the common expression is, though this is rather incorrect, as it is not running, or even moving, but stationary, in violation of the strictly temporary character of musical demonstrations.

As a rule, we build up our musical experiences from tone periods, one tone *after* another, but here we have seemingly a whole melody present itself in its total at once—picture-like—and it will stay so as an experience in its total as long as whatever reincarnated it wishes it to do so. But who is that mysterious dictator, who disturbs that *dolce far niente* of our resting brain with uninvited musical guests; who decides what shall occupy our mind or that some melody should occupy it at all, when it wishes to be at rest or left to its well earned musicless solitude?

This master is the function of our memory, which has become active upon being stimulated by something from without. As long as this stimulus plays upon memory's willing harpstrings, this melody will haunt us. When this stimulus is replaced by a new or stronger one, this haunting melody will disappear again as suddenly and mysteriously into the crowded abyss of our sub-consciousness as it has appeared.

It is a pity that the average man pays so little attention to the working of his brain, or knows so little about it, for he misses

a great deal of fun. There is nothing more interesting than to record the tricks our mind plays us when not occupied with a certain task. Tricks now frivolous, now serious, yet all explainable through the media of attention and memory as they are switched on and off, working or resting, to let ideas have free play, instead of having them well behaved, as becomes the orderly mind of a law abiding citizen.

Of all the untold stimuli that attack our senses every second, attention singles out certain ones for consideration. The others are supposed to pass by unnoticed, yet many slip by the guardian of our mind to disappear swiftly and mysteriously into our subconsciousness. At opportune moments these rise again to the surface and present themselves, whether we particularly wish them to do so or not.

Nothing happens by pure chance in the well-organized realm of nature; nothing is left to chance in the wonderful machinery of our brain and nervous system, whose working we can only observe through the demonstrations of that mysterious phenomenon—our mind. Whenever, then, a certain tune appears suddenly in our mind, it never does so accidentally or unbidden; it appears because it has been called and revived by something. That it is just that particular melody and not any other of the thousand and one that our mind harbors, is due to the fact that something has come equally suddenly into the foreground of our mind that was once closely connected with it, no matter how long ago. So was mother's lullaby of 50 years ago brought back to me by looking at her picture, but it came not back at once; it waited until bedtime, with which it was connected years ago.

Our memory is a powerful and exact working function, absolutely sovereign, uncontrollable and irrepressible. It sees to it that of whatever we think, we feel, we do, something remains as a residue, something is conserved, to be recalled again upon the slightest provocation. And this recall is not alone *in toto* but also *in parte*; the whole experience as well as the smallest detail may be brought back again and play a new part in our life.

For instance, a certain composition may arouse a certain feeling or emotion in us. At that particular moment we may not even be aware of that state of feeling, but let something else happen in afterdays stirring up the same emotion, this emotion will then form the connecting link between the new experience and the melody heard and affected by it years ago.

As an illustration, I shall narrate a few striking experiences of mine, where an emotion, a certain state of feeling stirred up by

an event out of all connection with either, led back to a certain song or melodic phrase.

Some years ago I studied Schubert's "Müller-Lieder" with a singer, Dr. D. A phrase in one of these songs has always impressed me as the quintessence of sadness and soul misery. It also seemed to me the keynote to the whole cyclus, a phrase in which the whole tragedy of the poor miller-boy seemed to be concentrated and crystalized.



While studying these songs, this feeling was perhaps not so very clear and intense; perhaps I was not as conscious of it as I am to-day, after it has been, so to speak, reinforced by other events. One day, passing the bulletin board of a newspaper, I read that the steamer Elbe had been in collision in the English Channel and had gone down with all on board. All at once an inner voice sang those plaintive thirds of Schubert's song to me. I could not get rid of them for a long while, and they haunted me persistently as long as the emotional state brought about by this catastrophe lasted.

And why? Was it accidental? No! These thirds were the most befitting musical expression of what moved me, and ever since the tragedy at sea and this melody have been inseparable.

In the next summer, while going abroad, the first officer of the *Patria* told me one evening that we were about where the Elbe sank. Immediately the melody appeared again in all its beauty and intense sadness, and while I write this, their plaintive mood draws my mind out to the bleak North Sea.

The teaching profession has many chances to observe this fascinating phenomenon, although perhaps not many teachers notice that sometimes, after having spoken of a certain student, a certain piano composition will appear clearly and sharply in their mind. It always will be a composition of which that particular pupil has made a particular failure or success, or that has given the teacher more pain or joy than any other. The reverse is true also,—that the sound of a composition will bring back certain pupils to one's mind, generally those who first took up its study.

In such a way music may bring back to our mind events of long ago. While using Liszt's Troubadour Phantasy, scenes from home of many years ago came into my mind again, and would not leave me throughout the whole lesson. Yes, even in my dreams that night I was home again.

This is explained very easily. My mother was very fond of Verdi's Troubadour and my sister, who sang very well, often sang parts of it for her, I playing the accompaniments.

But not alone in waking states, even into our dreams melodies will haunt us, as a recent experience dealing with this will prove. I am very fond of horses, and ride horseback regularly. Consequently my mind is filled with considerable horse-lore and all that belongs to it. The other night I had a wonderful time riding in my dream, until something woke me up. When I was quite awake I noticed the beginning of the sixth Liszt Rhapsody running through my mind which a pupil had played in the afternoon. I immediately began to hunt for the reason of its presence, for connection of horseback and rhapsody, and soon found it.

As I could not get the proper expression for the beginning measures, I suggested to her to imagine a troop of horsemen, singing as they rode along, just as the Cossacks used to do, when they entered the arena in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and here was the connection:

Riding—Cossacks singing—pupil—Rhapsody.

Perhaps some of my readers will smile, but to those acquainted with the Freudian theories this will appear quite clear.

Again, when I read of the Russian revolution, the last movement of Tschaiowsky's pathetic symphony occupied my mind for quite a while, but this is almost too plain an instance to be mentioned here.

Of course, such recalls do not always happen, and no doubt certain conditions are especially advantageous for it. For instance, an undisturbed or "empty" mind, as is necessary for suggestive experiments, will greatly help a melody to exert its full power, as the whole process is but a certain phase of the phenomenon of suggestion and even hypnotism.

Our mind is full of Leitmotifs, that closely connect the different acts, scenes and periods of our life's drama; and the whole scheme of Wagner's Leitmotif-Theory rests upon this psychologic foundation, dramatically, musically and emotionally, although Wagner most likely never looked upon it from that point of view. Genius creates spontaneously, and leaves it to

the theorist to explain the well-ordered laws of creation afterwards.

Frequently it is quite difficult to find the stimulus for the appearing melody, or the connecting link, in spite of long and careful trailing. We are then confronted with an indirect or secondary stimulation, which has still another link mysteriously hidden. Yet the process is there, and the stimulus must be somewhere, for nature never skips.

We deal with a different kind of musical mind echo, when motives or whole compositions, with which we are at present more or less intensely occupied, insist upon staying in our mind. In this case we do not deal with a matter of recall or memory, but with mental fatigue, due to excessive over-stimulation of our auricular organ, whose delicate mechanism has been maltreated, overworked, and cannot come to rest. As a muscle will keep on twitching all night after over-exertion, so these cells keep on vibrating and the only remedy is to withdraw the blood from the brain—the gasoline of the nervous system—through a cold foot bath, and the engine will stop on account of lack of motive power.

Occasionally when a melody gets too persistent and haunts us to death, one can fight it with its own weapon; that is, with another melody. It is like stopping a forest fire with back-firing. I remember painfully how the tune of "Pony Boy" would not leave me for a long while after the first accidental hearing. I fight such musical intruders almost exclusively with Wagner's Prize Song from the Mastersingers. Why just this, I have no reason or idea, but it relieves me every time after a determined application.

Occasionally one stimulus will affect one or more minds at the same time. I remember that once when walking with a violinist, we both started whistling the same melody at precisely the same instant. In those days my knowledge of such things was *nil*, but I recollect that both of us were quite surprised over this simultaneous musical outburst. No doubt something that we both noticed at once suggested that melody to us.

To prove the cussedness of our mind and its unwillingness on the other hand to be ordered to do things, it may be pointed out that it is often absolutely impossible, or at least quite difficult, to force back the return of a melody that has so mysteriously appeared from out the subconscious life as it is to suppress it.

Reading of the taking of a city somewhere in Europe by one of the fighting armies, all at once a march stepped briskly through my mind. It was a composition in vogue '70-71 and known as

"Pariser Einzugs March." At that time I was still a small boy, and I cannot recollect that since that time I have heard that march again. But ever since this peculiar "recall" I have tried to force it back, tried with all the memory tricks, suggestive and mnemo-technical, but in vain. Evidently the "recall" was too brief, the second impression too fleeting, too weak, to make a new "record." But the whole experience shows how little we really know of the mysterious working of our cerebral machine, and how little real control we have over it. I am sure that some day that march will reappear just as mysteriously as it vanished, a musical or mental will o' the wisp, darting about in the nebulous realm of my subconsciousness.

The theory of the haunting melody, responding to the bidding of a feeling of emotion or situation, may also explain in a more dignified, not to say charitable way, the well known reproach of plagiarism in the works of composers. A wag once called it "unconscious quotation" and he built better than he knew, for in all serious cases it is, of course, done absolutely unbeknown to the composer. We shall not speak here of the taking over of whole melodies, motives, etc., but of that fine, subtle influence that can be traced in the works of different composers.

Although in such cases we never have the same thematic material, we may speak with absolute certainty of the influence of one work upon the other, as a result of that strong working chain of feeling, situation, tones, etc.

Compare, for instance, the slumber motive of Wagner's "Walküre" with the little movement in E in Schumann's "Child falling asleep" from the "Scenes of Childhood." By the shifting of a few notes in Schumann's motive we get Wagner's. Even the key is the same.



Although one is not at all a copy of the other, both are alike in a subtle sense, and both deal with slumber. Why should it not be possible that there was a *rapport* established in Wagner's mind between the idea of slumber and Schumann's motive resting long forgotten in his subconsciousness, but eager to respond to the slightest stimulus.

Take Schumann's "A Haunted Spot" from his "Forest Scenes" and then play "Lonesome Path" of Scharwenka's "Bergfahrt." Again it is not a verbatim "quotation," but the influence of one upon the other is unmistakable and the connecting link here is the imagination which fills a lonesome path with just such gruesome pictures as the Schumann composition illustrates and the poem suggests.

The flowers, tho' stately growing,
Are here pale like the dead;
But one stands in the middle
Which sheets are glowing red.

The sun gave not its color
From him no passion flowed;
But from the earth it cameth—
That earth drank human blood.

I met with a similar experience myself. Reading a little folk-song I took it to the piano to find a melody to it. It came instantly, and I sketched it down and then I left it. When I came back to it a few days later I noticed that the beginning had an "unpleasant" familiar ring to it, and after hunting for awhile I found it to be exactly like the slow middle part of Schumann's "Wanderlied."

Both the little folk-song and that part of Schumann's song deal with love in foreign lands, and the melody is as befitting to the one as to the other poem in its intense sentimental and yearning mood. Yet I do not remember having heard or sung or played Schumann's song since my conservatory days. Why should, then, this melody immediately present itself when I wished to set these words to music? It cannot be called plagiarism; its "find" was again due to the subtle influence of an emotion which lived in two persons, was embodied in two poems, and found the same musical expression. Instead of feeling quite humiliated over the matter, I was rather pleased that my musical feeling was evidently quite correct in choosing its medium of musical expression, and I have ever since been very careful of accusing decent musicians of pilfering the works of others, and

whenever I meet with an especially interesting instance I start out immediately to find the cause and the reason for it.

The beginning of Beethoven's Sonata Pathétique shows the nucleus of the beginning motive of the Tristan Prelude. The whole Tristan is nothing but the longing for love, the very motive is the motive of yearning, and we know that Beethoven all his life long was in exalted love with some woman and yearned for the return of this feeling. Could not here this feeling be the link between the two motives, fundamentally so similar?

We find the same phantom-like "unconscious quotation" in different works of the *same* master. In the second act of Lohengrin when Telramund speaks with shuddering fear of Ortrud's occult powers the orchestra sounds a sequence of chords, vague and unrelated. We have here only the nucleus of that wonderful mysterious motive Wagner uses for the expression of the same power in the Ring of The Nibelungen. Once in the Gotterdammerung prologue, where the three Norns spin the thread of Siegfried's life and in the last act of the Walküre where Wotan weaves the spell of sleep over Brünnhilde.

Moderato

Wind

pp

Kdr.

pfz

piu p

etc.

Whenever we find this subtle influence at work the material is always dressed in different musical garb and an inexpressible, yes,

often untraceable something makes itself felt, especially in Schumann's work. We know we have heard it, but where, when? Such musical experiences are most tantalizing. We are always almost within reach, ready to place what is so vaguely suggested, but we never can really grasp and hold it.

Compare the thematic material and moods of Tschaikowsky's fifth Symphony with the finale of the sixth. The material is not the same by any means, but there are many prophetic lines in the fifth pointing to what is to come in the sixth. The fifth appears like a picture of the sixth, but seen through a mist, vague, indistinct, and barely recognizable, and it is in the sixth that these moods come to full realization.

When we look for a link between the two symphonies of the Russian composer we can easily find it in that mysterious tragedy which is said to have clouded his whole life.

Perhaps we might call such intimate relationship between musical expressions, musico-emotional affinities, if the whole phenomenon were not so phantom-like, so absolutely spiritual, even trans-mental, that it defies all naming or tracing.

But wherever we find them, we deal with the residue of emotional experiences, that are forever coming to the foreground and are the real foundation springs of all creations, may they reflect a tragedy, love, fight for principle, triumph or failure in life's deep struggle. And this close connection of feeling and creating of music might give us occasionally a clue to the true meaning of the music. It might reveal to us what forever vibrates in the composer's soul, that cannot come to rest, and fills all his works with that indefinable something, that the psychologist simply calls the recall, but that in reality is the echo of all that has sung through his whole life. Or is it a mysterious kind of energy, unmeasurable, not like mechanical or chemical energy, that ever so often explodes in a human brain and like radium forever gives out new elements without ever exhausting its first impetus?

Of all our mental phenomena, memory—physical and psychic—is the most wonderful. It is the central power of all our life's endeavor, joys and sorrows, and the haunting melody is one of its winged messengers to whom time and distances are unknown.